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# 'Spy dust' news offers lesson in stirring up dust



**Steve  
Daley**

**W**hen you read about 5-[4-nitrophenyl]-2,4-pentadien-1-al, or NPPD, do you think about the Libyan death squads?

Reports that the KGB, the Soviet internal security apparatus, has been dusting Americans living in Moscow with a chemical treatment for tracking their movements exploded onto television sets and front pages last week. Representatives of the State Department in Washington, D.C., insisted the Russians were using a "potentially dangerous" substance as a means of monitoring American activity in the Soviet capital.

The Soviets, to no one's surprise, vigorously denied the charge, and accused the Reagan administration of trying to intensify a public relations war between the countries as a summit conference with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev nears.

Whatever the veracity of the "dusting" story, or its resolution, it has supplied an object lesson in how to read your newspaper or watch your favorite news anchor. As it happens, compelling stories like "spy dust" have a habit of cropping up within the most extenuating of political circumstances.

The Soviets may well be up to all manner of unspeakable chicanery with NPPD, but the timing of the revelations, and the cavalier as-

essment of the danger to Americans is curious, at least.

At this writing, we don't know much of anything about "spy dust," other than its capacity to fit gracefully into a newspaper headline. In Michael McGuire's story in Friday's Tribune, American Embassy employees in Moscow complained that they hadn't been told what to look for, or where, or what the dangers of exposure to the chemical might be.

In recent political history, this is not the first instance of a precipitous, sensational story coming incandescently to light, complete with the hint of a hidden agenda, such as an impending summit or an anti-satellite testing program.

In December, 1981, Ronald Reagan granted an interview in which he talked about a team of Libyan terrorists crossing into the United States, with the White House as a possible target. Shortly after the interview, spokesmen for the Reagan administration asked the media to back off the "death squad" tales, knowing full well that wouldn't happen.

Before you could say NPPD, the press was chockablock with stories speculating that Air Force One would be shot down, that the presidential limousine would be attacked by rocket fire, that the White House itself would be assaulted by hordes of rampaging Libyans.

Security at the border with Mexico was stepped up as the name "Carlos," a European terrorist legend of sorts, came to the surface. Elaborate security measures were put into effect around the White House grounds as every day offered the promise of a new death squad angle, gun-toting Arabs storming the borders like so many politicized killer bees.

Time passed, and the Libyan death squads did not emerge. After a suitable bureaucratic wait, FBI head William Webster announced that his organization had never confirmed the existence of any Libyan death squads in the United States.

Republican Howard Baker, then Senate majority leader, politely said he thought the risk of death squad activity had diminished, but a White House spokesman lashed out at Baker, saying that he "didn't have any intelligence that would give rise to such a statement."

The dog-and-pony show continued for months, with no Libyans showing up at any border, no Libyans found armed and dangerous on Pennsylvania Avenue, no "Carlos," no Libyans firing rockets at elected officials.

Within a month of the first death squad scare, Reagan was in the business of denying at a televised press conference that his administration was the source of leaks about the Libyans.

Sen. Patrick Leahy [D., Vt.] told reporters that he felt "it was unfortunate that so many in the Reagan administration were leaking this stuff out."

Throughout the entire affair, the Reagan administration labored mightily to isolate the Libyan government. William Clark, then a deputy in office of the Secretary of State, announced that the administration was contemplating "political, diplomatic, economic and other measures" to combat the "current lawless behavior of Libyan government."

The procedure garnered no support among America's European allies and the hysteria over death squads withered away.

There may be more to "spy dust" in Moscow than initial reports indicate, but when dealing with any political administration, in Washington or elsewhere, it never hurts to cut the cards before arriving at a conclusion about a story that grabs the headlines and the network newscasts.